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Community-responsive scholar-activist research: conceptualizing capacity building and sustainability in a Northern California community-university partnership

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ABSTRACT

We critically examine the ongoing development of a collaborative, responsive, activist research process between academics and farmworkers. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with community-based researchers and scholar-activists, we assess our team's understanding of community capacity building and research sustainability as the conceptual and operational definitions of these concepts lack academic consensus. The definitions we present reflect a 12-year effort to respond to community needs through interdisciplinary research, planning, and action. Our community-university team's evolving understanding of community capacity building and research sustainability is contextualized by our community-driven, community-responsive, and collaborative process. We discuss strengths and limitations encountered when conducting community-responsive, scholar-activist research and conclude by offering the lessons learned.

KEYWORDS

Community-based participatory research; community capacity building; sustainable communities; social action; immigrants; university-community partnerships

Introduction

Most community capacity building and research sustainability evidence comes from community-based participatory research (CBPR¹), and their definitions are often incompletely interrelated and lacking in consensus (Hacker et al., 2012; Murphy et al., 2021). Such gaps in the literature limit the ability to generalize findings (Hearld et al., 2016). A question posed by Hacker et al. (2012) remains: How do community researchers and scholar-activists² discern, construe, and assess the impact of CBPR on community capacity building and sustainability? By examining the diversity of responses to this question provided by leaders of our 12-year community-university partnership, we will strengthen academic understanding of the benefits and costs of long-term CBPR. Leveraging these concepts to harvest strong and meaningful research projects between communities and universities is challenging without consistent and contextualized operating definitions.

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Franco and Tracey (2019) defined community capacity building as continuous enhancement of skills, processes, and resources that are required for communities to endure, adapt, and thrive. In the context of academic research, community capacity building focuses on improving a community's ability to maintain and develop projects deemed necessary by local residents (Hacker et al., 2012). Although the academic literature widely values community capacity building, little evidence demonstrates capacity building initiatives in practice actually achieving community development aspirations (Franco & Tracey, 2019). Our own research process enhanced community capacity by investing social capital and resources from the local university to ensure sustainability of community-led initiatives. When recommending how to make evaluations matter by having greater potential for policy and programmatic influence, Sridharan and Nakaima (2011) defined sustainability of a project as the potential to continue after funding ends. In public health, Schell et al. (2013) identified factors that might be related to a program's ability to sustain its activities and benefits over time including: funding stability, political support, partnerships, organizational capacity, program adaptation, program evaluation, communications, public health impacts, and strategic planning. As these definitions suggest, there is little consistency in the CBPR literature about the ways in which the concepts of community capacity building and research sustainability are conceptualized and operated.

We provide definitions of community capacity building and sustainability by community researchers and scholar-activists representing multiple arms of an active partnership. We contend that these definitions embody how the community-university team discerns, construes, and assesses the impact of CBPR in Squire Town (ST).³ Below we describe ST, our community-driven and collaborative process, and define the concepts of capacity building and sustainability.

Community

ST is a rural community about 20 miles from a large R1 research university and Sacramento. Latina/o-origin residents make up 70% of the town's population of 1,000 (US Census Bureau, 2020). Some residents are recent migrants, but many families have lived in ST for generations. Many community members are employed seasonally as agricultural workers. In 2019, 13% of Squire Town families live in poverty (US Census Bureau, 2019) which is double the state poverty rate (Ornelas et al., 2021). Despite resource limitations, residents consistently strengthened community capacity to overcome isolation, school and health clinic closures, excessive environmental pollution, and a drought-related municipal well collapse (Figure 1). Supplemental tables are included to share the scale of our partnership.⁴ While we focus on the community-university connections, we want to acknowledge the broad set of local partners and funding agencies supporting our actions.

Partnership formation

In 2009, the first two authors (Natalia and Rosa⁵) were invited by parents and a California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation (CRLAF) community advocate to help challenge the school district's decision to close the only ST school. Mothers mobilized and became unintended leaders while challenging the school board decision that lacked parental consultation (Deeb-Sossa & Manzo, 2018; Manzo & Deeb-Sossa, 2018). As a result of the mothers' activist efforts, the neighboring school across the county line expanded to accept ST students and nurtured their academic recovery. The whole process hurt families so much that only 14% of the reconstituted charter school's student population were ST residents. The power of ST leaders to advocate for their families and rapidly drive community improvements inspired the academic partners to commit to community-led, scholar-activist research and teaching.

A critical aspect of partnership formation was the academics *listening* to community members' desires and needs before undertaking a project. Listening from the outset helped ensure that projects are not skewed toward external interests (Schmidt & Kehoe, 2019). The listening process required bidirectional communication that voiced community needs and debated solutions rooted within existing community resources. For example, in response to the mothers' request for youth mentoring opportunities, the second author established a tutoring program with undergraduate student volunteers in partnership with local schools that provided a venue and transportation.

Similarly, ST mothers decided to challenge the stories told *about* their educational opportunities by instead documenting stories told *by* the farm-worker residents themselves. In response to this, the first author employed a *fototestimonios* (photovoice) methodology to challenge the deficit discourse and victimization stereotypes targeting Latina/o and immigrant communities in the US (Deeb-Sossa & Moreno, 2016). Through ten exhibits, the ST families raised further intersectional concerns about: (1) lack of affordable housing and substandard living conditions in local farm-worker labor camps; (2) lack of an affordable local grocery; (3) increasing gang activity by local youth lacking healthy and structured extracurricular activities; and (4) the need for a community childcare center and education opportunities for adults. These examples from the first two authors highlight the scholar-activism and activation of university social capital and resources in response to community needs and assets.

The primary method utilized for this partnership, and this manuscript, are regular research team meetings with community leaders and academic researchers. Initially, Natalia and Rosa held weekly meetings with mothers which became formalized into a weekly social for ST women. This regular meeting structure was the foundation of the *promotora*⁶ role in our project. The volunteer community leaders started in an activist and gatekeeper

capacity toward the university researchers. As this partnership built power and resources, the role of the promotoras extended to actively conducting research as part of the Environmental Health Project with the last two authors and beyond.

Ongoing research

After mobilizing against the school closure (Deeb-Sossa & Manzo, 2018; Deeb-Sossa & Moreno, 2016; Manzo & Deeb-Sossa, 2018), the community decided to contribute their time, energies, and resources (financial and material) to open a medical and veterinary healthcare clinic (Sweeney et al., 2018), conduct regular community health assessments, address potential environmental health risks, and advocate for improved transportation access (Figure 1, Supplemental Table 2). This extensive CBPR process was possible through many partnerships between academics and community members, as well as with nonprofits, government officials, churches, businesses, and other stakeholders (Supplemental Table 1). The community-responsiveness and authenticity of these necessary partnerships required open communication, transparency, trust, flexibility, equitability, accountability, and shared interests.

ST community leaders and academics engineered an equitable partnership to benefit all members and reduce the risks of services collapsing due to a lack of capacity. The balance of community and academic leadership on each project was scaled to improve the likelihood of success. For example, our team mobilized many partners to overcome sustainability barriers to develop a community garden: Local landscapers and tradespeople offered their skills. The ST Community Service District offered to provide free water supply. A church offered their vacant lot. Students from Landscape Architecture, Chicana/o Studies, and the University Farm created an organizational structure and raised \$50,000 from the county, community fundraisers, and student fellowships. As construction nears completion, the garden is currently a catalyst for post-pandemic youth activities, healthy habits classes, recreation, and community-led food production/distribution.

Partnerships, community capacity building, and sustainability

After 12 years of collaboration, we asked our partnership leaders how they understood, defined, and valued the impact of CBPR. We conducted interviews with ST promotoras, graduate students, and the lead faculty researcher (n = 8) providing each of them an opportunity to reflect, discuss, and evaluate the collaboration, in particular how they defined the concepts of community capacity building and sustainability.

Community capacity building

In this section, we share the definitions of community capacity building related to CBPR and informed by our engagement over the years. We highlight the themes that emerge from the definitions provided by the community-university research team: the shared goal to support community; co-learning and diffusion of knowledge, skills, and information to promote social change; and committed and equitable partnerships.

The promotoras, in particular, highlighted how productive the partnerships were in building their knowledge, skills and network of resources to be able to transfer or diffuse all what was learned throughout the community to creatively support the needs of the community members. As Angela noted, “I was educated and therefore, when I’m educated, I can educate others in the community along the way. And so, my capacity is knowledge and understanding what’s going on with community issues.” Similarly, Sol enthusiastically shared, “That’s why I love this project because they come to give us information that we don’t know. They tell us where we might go or where to get resources. I think that’s our main problem. We don’t have any resources in this little town.”

Likewise, the promotoras emphasized how the partnership facilitated the relationships, resources, buy-in and development of shared goals to respond to community needs. As Mariquita described, “Is developing and strengthening skills and abilities to do and have resources that organizations in the community need to survive. One example is the Resource Center. The clinic, you, and the ST Environmental Health Project have provided resources for the community. The community has benefited from educational programs, tutoring and mentoring, WIFI connection, transportation that now are available in this unincorporated community that before were not here. Since you arrived you have promoted health and self-sufficiency in the community.” Similarly, Pat defined community capacity building as, “The more projects we take on the more the more things we do. You’re able to do more.” This promotora’s definition acknowledges how community capacity building leads to sustainability.

The university team members’ definitions of community capacity building highlight the importance of cultural humility and asset based approaches, equitable partnerships, and dedication of available resources for community goals. For example, highlighting truly valuing and developing meaningful and equitable partnerships, when Alfonso was asked to define community capacity building, he noted that it is “to confer professional skills and resources.” He then added “This project has taught me that communities are powerful agents of change, which means our job is not so much to ‘help’ as it is to ‘value’ our local partners.” Likewise, Rosa contended that, “Recognizing the community’s cultural wealth/knowledge and assets and activating those to engage in

meaningful community work that will create change and improve the lives of community members.” Skye stressed the importance of committing available resources for community goals. As she explained, “The dedication of time, space, and resources to address a problem by building local resources and recruiting dependable external partners to fill gaps.” Natalia discussed the linkages between measurable outcomes, co-learning and sustainability. As they noted when asked to define community capacity building,

Working ourselves out of a job. Working towards the goals of the community, having community members eventually taking over the distinct research and community projects as a result of the co-learning that happened, and then having us as researchers moving on to other projects as the needs are met.

Given the definitions shared by the community-university research team about what community capacity building is, we propose that community capacity building is: the ability to create, maintain and value committed and equitable partnerships that support community. The partnerships support community by addressing needs in a culturally humble and asset based approach. The partnerships with community also encourage co-learning, diffusion of knowledge, skills, and information, as well as the dedication of available resources for community goals.

Sustainability

In this section we share definitions of sustainability related to CBPR and informed by our engagement with ST for over a decade. We highlight the themes that emerge from the definitions provided by the community-university research team, in particular long-lasting commitment by trusted partners; improvements in community’s well-being; flexible and creative community-responsive efforts; and long-lasting commitment by trusted partners.

The promotoras indicated longevity to be a theme to define the sustainability of the 12-year partnership. For example, Angela noted how sustainability is reflected in “the longevity; which shows dedication and commitment.” Similarly, Mariquita reflected,

It is longevity . . . for a project to be here and they trust them. For that to happen, like in the case of the ST One Health Center, students go out every time there’s a chance to do outreach . . . Because they care about the community . . . It has stayed so long because of the people that run it, like the [lead doctor] and you [Natalia], they care and care deeply for the health care and the well being of our community.

As this promotora highlighted, the endurance of the partnership was in large part due to the trust that was developed, nurtured and sustained over time by the different team members and individuals involved in the project.

Likewise promotoras highlighted the improvements in community's well-being that were a result of the community-responsive, scholar-activist research. As Sol noted,

The whole ST project is still sustainable. For example, in the case of the One Health Clinic, the students are still coming around knocking door to door. I just saw them yesterday still knocking door to door. Students are trying to inform people about TeleHealth. They're still going, they're still not indoors, but answering questions for the community and keeping people informed. And the community garden. That is looking really good. People are getting excited about it.

The student-run health care center, which was opened in 2012 as a result of the work, is still providing linguistically and culturally competent and humble healthcare services that understand that human health is linked to that of their animals and their environment. As a result, veterinary services and dentistry are now being provided, and food insecurity is being addressed with the creation of the community garden.

Promotoras also stressed the flexible and creative community-responsive efforts. For example, Pat enthusiastically discussed,

Look at the bus. You know the bus hopefully is going to be here forever. The community garden as well, and it's going to grow. You know, it's going to grow. The research as well. I hope it continues to grow as well. I hope more researchers come in and need us to help them figure out the directions we as a community want to go. Because there's so many things we still need, like the mental health clinic. It is so desperately needed here, and I deal with this personally in my life.

The university team members' definitions of sustainability also highlighted the importance of long-lasting commitment by trusted partners. For example, Alfonso defined it as "a hard road of building and maintaining community partnerships and funding. If you're unable to commit, community-based research may not be the best approach for answering your questions." Similarly, Rosa underscored the importance of a durable commitment by noting how sustainability is "Long-standing engagement of communities in addressing the challenges and barriers."

Natalia called attention to the underlying goal of CBPR in their definition of sustainability which highlights "challenging inequities and injustices using a community-responsive approach." This also was echoed in Skye's definition, "Process of discovering permanent solutions to chronic and emerging challenges. Sustainability does not deplete or underuse local resources . . . there must be a balance of creation and consumption."

Given the definitions shared by the community-university research team we propose a definition of sustainability: longevity of an efficacious project that has produced perceptible and significant improvements in a community's

well-being. These improvements are a result of flexible, creative, community-responsive efforts, as well as long-lasting commitment by trusted partners to the community and projects.

Limitations and strengths

This community-responsive research process required trust and dedication by the academics and community members. This process was difficult as it required working many hours on-call, including weekends, and other personal sacrifices. The diverse team and stakeholders made mistakes and disagreed along the way. Conflict mediation, accountability, and forgiveness were critical to move forward and accomplish shared goals. The major barriers identified by the research team for conducting community-responsive, scholar-activist research will be discussed below.

A major communication disconnect existed between residents and the service providers that aspired to address the needs of the community. When our research team engaged the county leadership, challenges over funding allocation and underrepresentation of ST in agency surveys and meetings were cited to explain gaps in services that occurred during our community-university partnership. The county attempted to provide all services in Spanish, but some services were based online which was a major technological challenge for residents in a community that only obtained high speed internet access in 2017. With substantial effort, the communications capacities and expertise in the documentation of community needs by members of the university-community partnership helped to bring down these barriers – as demonstrated in our transportation and garden victories.

The structure of the academic advancement and reward system contributed to pressure to rush the work for both the academic and community partners in this project. As academics, we were trained to develop a study, collect data, analyze the data, and publish. This training and the pressure for academic advancement can inspire helicopter scholars who enter communities to gather data just to get their next publication while neglecting community trust and investments. For graduate students preparing for the job market or for junior scholars on the tenure track, such systemic pressures might lead to conducting extractive research in which community members have no voice in the research that impacts them, while the scholars co-opt the right to define and describe their lives, their learning, and their identities (e.g., Freire, 1970), often in deficit terms (Canagarajah & Stanley, 2015).

Our project challenged deficit perspectives to form genuine partnerships that valued contributions and talents of all members by rejecting notions that community knowledge was less valuable than academic knowledge and that students were less powerful than academic faculty. Decision-making reflected negotiations with equal power between the community leaders and academics

leading each subproject. Consistent communication between parties with sufficient reflection time was essential. Team members communicated through a variety of venues including social media, phone, text, e-mail, regular community leader meetings, thematic town halls, and formal meetings for the various boards that organize community programs like the service district or schools. The long hours we spent after work and on weekends to communicate, clarify, and revise paid off when we implemented research or community organizing protocols with ease. For example, after meeting weekly with community leaders for three months to design a survey and sampling strategy, our four promotoras took only two weeks to administer a 100-participant, 30-minute survey during the peak farming season. Our investment in this process was apparent through intensive *pitching* sessions with special consideration of capacity and sustainability before endorsement of any new project. Our team acted as gatekeepers for other researchers and institutions seeking to work with ST or provide services to the community. This process lowered barriers to access the community, created synergy between projects, and prevented extractive processes.

Rejecting the extractive research model with community members making decisions with the research team, led to administrative delays. For example, over five years we have submitted five IRB protocols with an average of five revisions to each protocol as situations in the community changed. When asked to present our work, we always request that at least one promotora is featured to ensure that community voices, work, resilience, and needs are centered. We decline opportunities when uncompensated time commitments for promotoras are excessive and if venues or audiences are not accommodat-ing (lacking translators and being chastised by scholars).

Finally, our team's commitment to community-responsive research is ongoing. We are in constant communication with promotoras, community leaders, community-based organizations, as well as with farmworkers who share with us the daily comings and goings of ST residents – their resilience as well as their concerns. When the pandemic hit, we organized a donation of personal protective equipment and hand sanitizer to farmworkers and the elderly at the residents' behest. We also have been monitoring the local delivery of the COVID-19 vaccine, advocating for local vaccine clinics that prioritize rural immigrant essential workers at the local board of supervisors as they seem unaware of the digital divide, language barriers, and low educational levels.

Conclusion

Since its inception, the project has been community-responsive and adheres to CBPR principles to incubate community development through grassroots action. As Skye echoed,

Academic intrusions into communities are often temporary and not proactive like a firehose centralizing decision-making, extracting from local systems, wasting resources, and crushing things. Our team embraced a different model – the community well maintained by both community and academic partners. The well is available for various community needs including emergencies, accessible to any community member, and reinforced by the flow of resources from external stakeholders.

A project will only be able to continue in a community if equitable relationships are effectively and respectfully created by empowering everyone involved in the research process (Suarez-Balcazar, 2020). All members of our project were challenged to be humble (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). This is expressed in the reflections by Rosa,

As a community-responsive scholar we must recognize that we are not the ultimate knowledge producers, and that the experts are the community members. Having the opportunity to learn from the community requires us to share our resources and social capital with them to facilitate their capacity to address the challenges and inequities in their local community.

Our flexibility and responsiveness are only possible through intensive communication between ST, promotoras, and academics, as noted by Alfonso,

Often in my experience I sought research professionals for advice about working with communities while looking to community members for advice about working with research professionals. The advice I received from all sides carried equal weight in terms of making the best decisions for the community as a whole. Consequently, the most valuable thing I learned is to appreciate differences in perspectives about the realities of doing community-based research. It is a long and arduous process but one that is worth it.

Consistent and high-quality communication is challenging for academics and community members with limited training or support for these efforts.

Our ongoing community-responsive research opened opportunities for the community of ST to voice concerns previously overlooked, unarticulated, or ignored. Through more than 12 years these residents have called to their university partners and public officials for radical social transformation, through their valor to speak truth, share stories, and have imagined a more just and equitable community. This was echoed by Natalia's reflections, "We must continue repositioning the university and its resources – instead of being aloof and separate from marginalized and underserved communities – to belong to and help these communities, such as the farmworking community of ST."

Engaging community members in CBPR is a powerful method to fuel their success as active agents of change. This case study is already creating capacity building in a sustainable and humble way not only in ST but in other communities. As undergraduates, graduate students, promotoras, and lead faculty

researchers graduate, travel to other states, and/or obtain other jobs, we are already seeing that they are promoting collaborative and community responsive research processes.

COMMUNITY EVENTS

2003: Family Resource Center founded
2005: CRLAF partnership formed
2009: Local school and health clinic closures
2010: Local school reopened as charter school
2015: Lost 2 of 3 public water wells in drought
2017: Community Garden Project founded
2017: High speed internet installed in community
2018: Camp Fire in neighboring region
2019: Rural Microtransit program initiated by county transit authority
2019: Parent cooperative non-profit preschool closed
2020: Public water well replaced by volunteer-led service district
2021: River cleanup and boat launch redevelopment by county

UNIVERSITY EVENTS

2003: First mural project by Chicana/o Studies
2003: Landscape architecture researchers developed a school playground
2009: School Family Fototestimonios
2010: Community survey and mapping
2012: Student-run medical clinic founded
2012: Youth Fototestimonios
2013: Student-run veterinary clinic founded
2013: Community health survey
2015: Environmental Health Project founded
2016: Tutoring project founded
2016: Dental Clinic founded
2017-2019: Health surveys, focus groups, fototestimonios, and household sampling
2020: Telemedicine clinic services initiated

Notes

1. CBPR is a collaborative research process that equitably involves scholars and community members in the research process (Deeb-Sossa, 2019). The purpose is threefold: (1) build and increase community capacity to conduct research and organize community actions; (2) promote social change through adoption of sustainable evidence-based practices that enhance programs and partnerships over time (Alexander et al., 2003); and (3) influence outcomes at multiple levels (Pluye et al., 2004; Rappaport et al., 2008).
2. Goldrick-Rab (2014) defined a scholar-activist as one that “begins with a set of testable assumptions, subjects these to rigorous research, and once in possession of research findings seeks to translate those findings into action.”
3. To protect confidentiality, we use pseudonyms to refer to geographic communities, individuals, and organizations.
4. Supplemental materials available at https://figshare.com/projects/Community-Responsive_Scholar_Activist_Research_Conceptualizing_Capacity_Building_and_Sustainability_in_a_Northern_California_Community-University_Partnership/123922
5. We use our first names just as we do with the promotoras, as that is the way the community addressed us.
6. *Promotoras de salud* or community health workers are people with close ties to ST that work to address barriers to access to care by facilitating engagement with health care providers and social support services. They provide culturally and linguistically appropriate education, advocacy, and outreach (Cramer et al., 2018). *Promotoras de salud* often work as *gatekeepers*, performing as *cultural* and *linguistic* brokers between researchers and communities (Johnson et al., 2013; WestRasmus et al., 2012). At certain steps along this process, our team of *promotoras* played an extended role as researchers responsible for data collection and dissemination.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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